

Tribute to Travis: A family honors son's passion for the active life

Tom and Carol Olesen love to tell you about their teenage son Travis's accomplishments—his 3.96 grade point average and his powerlifting trophies, for example—but they also remember his antics. Sitting at her dining room table in Spanaway, Washington, Carol laughs when she explains how she had to run to K-Mart to resupply Travis after a botched effort in home hair-coloring.

Listening to the Olesens, it seems as if their blue-eyed broad-shouldered son, who drowned in a swimming accident three years ago, easily could walk through the front door and join in, getting a few laughs at his mom and dad's expense.

Even as shock and pain engulfed them when Travis died, his parents honored his enthusiastic approach to life by choosing tissue and cornea donation. They carried out Travis's specifically stated wishes to donate, but they also knew their choice reflected the way he lived his life.



Travis Olesen's gifts have benefited 27 patients so far.

A charismatic 18-year-old with friends across the social spectrum, Travis made his parents proud for many reasons. In addition to the outstanding grades and two state-championships in powerlifting, he was a scholarship-award winner, senior class president, honor society member, blood donor, three-year varsity player and junior-year captain of the football team, and member of his high-school's state champion bowling team.

Through their generous decision to donate, the Olesens responded to others' needs, even as they faced devastating sorrow. So far, 27 patients, aged 15 to 89, have benefited from Travis's gifts. The recipients live as close by as Washington, California, Montana, and British Columbia, and as far away as Pennsylvania and Louisiana.

"There are still hard days," says Carol, an easygoing, petite woman. "We do take days when we need them, to cry. But we can sit and talk about Trav and it warms our hearts."

Ten pushups

Tom recalls how Travis became interested in powerlifting. The Olesens' older son, Zachariah, once suggested that his younger brother was "so fat and lazy he couldn't do ten pushups."

In the privacy of the bathroom, Travis discovered that he was able to do only five. He took the challenge, trained hard—often working out with his father—and went on to his powerlifting victories.

Donations of bone, tendons, fascia, skin, heart valves, and corneas mirror Travis's passion for the active life. In particular, his gifts of musculoskeletal tissue have helped patients recover from traumas, congenital defects, and degeneration that severely limited their ability to participate in everyday activities, and the more strenuous exercise so important to a person like Travis.

"Of course we were in a state of shock," Tom says of the hours after Travis died. "But for us it was really easy to make the decision. There was no question, the donation was going to happen."

Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries are common and debilitating among people who avidly pursue sports—Travis's tissue has been transplanted in six recipients to repair ACLs. His gifts of bone have aided two patients needing hip replacements, procedures that almost always result in immediate pain relief and increased mobility.

Other donations of bone and cartilage have helped alleviate pain and restore normal range of motion in patients with severe knee and spinal problems—everyone from a young woman with scoliosis to middle-aged recipients with severe joint degeneration.

A tragic day _____

The Friday before Travis's death, his parents had attended an open house for the parents of incoming freshman at the University of Washington to "show us where our money was going," recalls Tom, a burly 22-year-Marine Corps veteran who now works as a deputy sheriff in Pierce County.

Two days later, Travis went to a lake where he and a buddy decided to swim for an island, "in an area where they shouldn't have been," says Tom, with the worldly wise look of a father who remembers what it's like to be a teenager.

The water was very cold. Travis, though extremely fit, had little body fat and became hypothermic. His friend tried to save him when he became fatigued, but was not able to.

Tom and Carol had gone grocery shopping that afternoon at a nearby military base; Tom's pager repeatedly went off. Cell phone reception was poor, so he decided to drive home before responding. As he and Carol rounded the corner to their cul d' sac, he saw a co-worker from the sheriff's department waiting in the driveway with his wife.

Tom instantly understood he was going to be facing the worst moment of his life. His friends had come to offer comfort because they thought Carol and Tom already had learned of Travis's death by phone, but instead they were to break the heart-rending news to the Olesens.

He was in favor _____

"Of course we were in a state of shock," Tom says of the hours after Travis died. "You're going through all the emotions you can possibly go through, but for us it was

really easy to make the decision. There was no question, the donation was going to happen."

"When I grew up," says Carol, "there was never an opportunity to help someone else when you died. Trav had talked about going into medicine, so I thought donation was something he would want."

Carol also remembered being with Travis when he renewed his driver's license and was asked whether he would become an organ and tissue donor. "It was very matter-of-fact," she says. "He definitely was in favor. I know it's what he would have wanted."

Referral outside the hospital _____

Because Travis did not die in a hospital, his death was referred to the Northwest Tissue Center by the Pierce County Medical Examiner's office. Federal regulations require that every hospital death be referred to a donation agency for evaluation. For deaths outside hospitals, however, there is no such regulatory requirement, although medical examiners and coroners in the region do make referrals. To help extend the option of donation to families whose loved ones, like Travis, are never treated in a hospital, a pilot program in Washington State is making it possible for the State Patrol to quickly refer potential donors at fatal accident scenes. (See "One man's determination results in new [State Patrol program](#),".).

Body, mind, soul _____

Travis's cornea donation brought the Olesens a trans-Pacific connection they never could have imagined. Not long before he died, Travis told his parents that he was planning to get a tattoo. He'd chosen the words, "body, mind, soul" and opted for Tom's idea to have it completed in kanji, a Japanese script.

Travis never had the chance to get the tattoo. After he died Tom had the characters imprinted on his own bulky arm, along with two smaller characters representing Travis's name.

Five of Travis's friends followed suit. Carol chose much smaller tattoos, getting both Travis's and Zachariah's names in kanji.

Then the Olesens received a thank-you letter, in Japanese, from one of Travis's two Japanese cornea recipients. The letter had been translated for Northwest Lions Eye Bank. The English is not perfect, but the recipient's gratitude is clear.

His words were, "I have lost heart since I couldn't see anything. Then your nice son gave me a great hope and a miracle light. Now I greatly appreciate being gifted a part of your son's life. Thank you very very much."

"We were so happy that he was able to donate corneas," says Carol. "It's really neat that someone is seeing through Trav's eyes."

Friends forever _____

Throughout the harrowing experience of losing a son, the Olesens have been surrounded by a supportive community. Carol and Tom remain in close touch with many of Travis's friends—a studio portrait of five of them hangs in the Olesens' living room.

"They've helped out so much," says Carol. "We couldn't have made it through without them. The house was full of kids the night before the service and for the next two or three nights."

This year, two of Travis's closest friends showed up on Mother's Day with a bouquet for Carol. The Olesens recently attended another's 21st birthday party. "It's a big year for all of them," says Carol with a smile.

The Olesens feel a special responsibility toward the young man who was swimming with Travis when he died. "I wanted him to know that I felt no anger toward him, that I had no animosity whatsoever," Tom says. "So I gave him Trav's car."

A continuing legacy _____

Travis's contribution to his high school, Spanaway Lake, continues. A family friend two years behind him there organized a presentation on cornea, tissue and organ donation for a health class. She invited Tissue Center Donation Specialist Denise Dodge to speak, noting that Travis's story and photo were featured in the 2002 Donation Awareness Calendar. The calendar is produced by the Tissue Center, Northwest Lions Eye Bank, and Life Center Northwest.

Carol says the calendar and the presentation both had an impact. "I've had more people come up to me and say, 'Hey, this is something I want to do, to make sure I could be a tissue donor.'"

Asked what they think Travis would say about being a tissue and cornea donor who helped so many people, his parents pause for a moment. Then Tom smiles, puffs up his barrel chest in a mock show of teenage bravado, and says, "Damn, I'm good, aren't I?"